

With all the main UK political parties pledging a significant expansion in housing delivery in their recently launched general election manifestos, the need to speed up the planning system should be high on the agenda of any incoming administration. The current government has also been grappling with this subject and has promised to publish an 'Accelerated Planning' white paper.

However, what is meant by accelerating the planning process?

Is it the efficient consideration and determination of planning applications in a transparent manner?

The timely adoption of a local plan?

Or the bolstering of local government resources?

The BPF and its membership has sought to provide answers to some of these questions through the publication of this Accelerated Planning Manifesto. This contains industry perspectives on how the planning system needs to be reformed, as well as the specific areas of the system that deserve greater attention from central government if we are to truly bring about an accelerated planning system.



We would like to see:

1. **Better resourced local authority planning departments**

If the ambition of accelerating the planning process is to be realised, local authority planners need to be better supported from both central government and the private sector. One of the contradictions in government policy since 2010 is that spending on the English planning system has been cut by 55% (inflation adjusted per head) – the greatest fall across all council activities – meanwhile housing targets over the same period have increased by 50% to 300,000.

A future government should invest heavily in local authority planning departments to address these funding cuts combined with more investment from the private sector. The BPF supported the recent rise in planning fees in January 2018 and would be supportive of any government proposals that brought about a further performance-based increase.

2. Up-to-date Local Plans, and the government use their existing powers to intervene more effectively

An up-to-date and effective Local Plan is an essential ingredient if we are to achieve the ambition of accelerating the planning process. However, currently only 42% of local authorities have up-to-date plans (i.e. less than five years old) with significant gaps in the areas with the greatest housing need.

Government, through the Planning Inspectorate, has powers to intervene where local plan preparation is inadequate and over time the housing delivery test will increasingly encourage local authorities to deliver more. There is certainly scope for government to go further in this area by requiring every local authority to have an up-to-date plan by 2021 and commit to meaningful intervention when this is not the case.

With an up-to-date local plan in place, many of the inefficiencies associated with the development management phase would significantly reduce.

3. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) revitalise the presumption in favour of sustainable development

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is clear that there is a presumption in favour of sustainable development (para 10). When the presumption was introduced in the first edition of the NPPF (2012) it had a discernible effect on the attitude of planning

officers and inspectors. However, as time has passed, this effect seems to have worn thin, and practitioners find that the presumption now carries little weight.

We would like to see the presumption refreshed, with a clear statement from Government that local planning authorities (LPAs) should work proactively with applicants to make all but the most misguided applications approvable; and that, where there is doubt, the benefit should be given to promoters of development where they have shown concerted engagement with the local communities and stakeholders.

4. Local Plans get back to enabling and supporting development in the right places at the right time

The Government's ambition for 300,000 homes a year is laudable. However, the geographic focus is on London and the south (we estimate this equates to 45% of the 300,000 target) where the tensions such as green belt review, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and infrastructure needs are most significant.

This tension and apparent inconsistency in policy aims and objectives needs to be recognised and addressed by central government together with the application of the duty to co-operate.

The requirement for Local Plans to be reviewed every five years is welcome. However, the burden of this needs to be eased with focused reviews and plans being shorter and more concise, targeted at deliverables.

5. MHCLG publish good practice guidance for the use of Planning Performance Agreements

BPF members are supportive of Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) and view them as an effective development management tool for delivering more resource and certainty of timescales into the process for larger complex development schemes, as well as allowing for greater dialogue between parties. However, many authorities have limited experience of entering into a PPA and as such there is sometimes a reluctance to move away from their standard local planning procedures.

A good practice guide for the use of PPAs, issued by MHCLG, would be of value, covering:

- A short and simple model PPA agreement; to include a programme through to committee; response times; resource commitments and the role of statutory consultees,
- Good practice in agreeing PPAs; to include who should produce the draft agreement and who should sign on behalf of the LPA. The guidance should also emphasise that PPAs should be kept simple and agreed as quickly as possible to avoid diverting officer resources away from working on the application.

PPAs should also include statutory consultees and County Councils. They should extend beyond determination through the discharge of conditions and to implementation. The industry would be glad to work with MHCLG in developing and refining this guidance.

6. Greater thought given to a more structured and consistent approach to engagement prior to committee determination

The quality of engagement prior to an application going to a local planning committee varies and as such there should be a focus on how a more consistent approach to engagement prior to determination at planning committees can be promoted.

Examples of good engagement practices that should be encouraged in relation to major applications include:

- Pre-committee briefings for elected members,
- A form of chair's review two weeks prior to committee where the chair can convey the elected members' key concerns. This would, in turn, allow the applicant an opportunity to work on these ahead of the formal committee meeting,
- PPAs used to guarantee better engagement prior to committee,
- Agreeing a draft Section 106 (or if not possible, at least detailed s106 heads of terms) before it goes to committee,
- Local authority planning officers being clear with applicants on the internal stakeholders that need to be consulted as part of the application.

7. LPA resources freed up by reducing the time spent on householder applications

The greater use of local development orders is an opportunity to free up local planning officers' time to deal with more complex schemes. One option would be for authorities to issue local development orders that allow the standard typologies combined with some form of deemed consent. Local authorities could be encouraged to prepare design guides to address the vast majority of extensions and works to what are often uniform residential areas, compliance with which provides deemed consent. There is scope to explore whether there is a role for Neighbourhood Plans in this process.

8. Government encourage LPAs to publish model Section 106 clauses and model conditions

Most authorities will have a list of model conditions to assist their planning officers in dealing with applications in an efficient and consistent manner. These should be published, and applicants could put forward a schedule of proposed conditions (with or without amendments). Conditions should be triggered in relation to the relevant works rather than commencement per se to enable schemes to proceed.

Boiler plate/best practice drafting of s106 obligations could also be circulated by the LPA with the presumption that they will be used unless a good reason is given to the contrary. Central government should issue guidance (preferably with an up-to-date precedent s106 agreement) advocating local authorities to adopt standardised drafting to ensure that s106 agreements are completed as soon as possible.

For more information on this manifesto please contact:

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